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RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH PRIORITY 0933
RUEHJM/AMCONSUL JERUSALEM PRIORITY 1416
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STATE FOR NEA, NEA/IPA, NEA/PPD

WHITE HOUSE FOR PRESS OFFICE, SIT ROOM
NSC FOR NEA STAFF

SECDEF WASHDC FOR USDP/ASD-PA/ASD-ISA
HQ USAF FOR X0XX
DA WASHDC FOR SASA
JOINT STAFF WASHDC FOR PA
CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL FOR POLAD/USIA ADVISOR
COMSOCEUR VAIHINGEN GE FOR PAO/POLAD
COMSIXTHFLT FOR 019

JERUSALEM ALSO ICD
LONDON ALSO FOR HKANONA AND POL
PARIS ALSO FOR POL
ROME FOR MFO

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SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

1. Mideast
2. Aftermath of Israeli Elections

Key stories in the media:

The Jerusalem Post quoted senior GOI officials as saying that PM Ehud Olmert's decision to condition a Gaza cease-fire and the opening of the border crossings on the release of Gilad Shalit comes

amid a growing sense in Jerusalem that Hamas is not QseriousQ about releasing Shalit and would be happy if the current situation continued Qindefinitely.Q Maariv quoted senior Israeli defense sources as saying, among mutual recriminations between the entourages of Olmert and DM Ehud Barak, that the deal is not moving forward. Leading media cited Egyptian mediatorsQ anger over IsraelQs linkage of the two issues.

The media quoted President Shimon Peres as saying that until he received the official results of TuesdayQs elections, he is Qhesitant to even discuss with myself the subjectQ of assigning one of the political leaders the responsibility of forming a government.

All media reported that yesterday Kadima agreed to all of Yisrael BeiteinuQs demands but one, including toppling Hamas, changing the electoral system, funding immigrants, reforming conversions, and recognizing civil unions between men and women. The only demand Kadima did not accept was initiating a loyalty oath to the state. HaQaretz reported that Yisrael Beiteinu Chairman Avigdor Lieberman and Kadima chief Tzipi Livni are working to form a "civil front" to counter the right-wing and ultra-Orthodox parties which Likud has been wooing in the coalition talks. HaQaretz quoted sources in Kadima and Likud as saying they don't expect Lieberman to recommend any candidate to President Shimon Peres on Thursday as Yisrael Beiteinu's choice to form a new government. Lieberman would instead try to force the formation of a national unity government consisting of Kadima, Likud and Yisrael Beiteinu, without the ultra-Orthodox Sephardi party Shas. Makor Rishon-Hatzofe reported that Likud Chairman Benjamin Netanyahu prefers a broad-based government.

Citing the AP, HaQaretz quoted visiting U.S. Senator Benjamin Cardin (D-MD) as saying yesterday that there is little difference between the policies of President Obama and his predecessor over Iran -- both want to keep Iran from getting nuclear weapons. Also citing the AP, HaQaretz reported that Senator John Kerry is challenging Syria to demonstrate its seriousness about encouraging peace and stability in the Middle East. Kerry will meet with Syria's president this week on a tour of the region that began yesterday in Egypt. The senator said the U.S. is eager to talk to Syria, whose president said last month he also wants a dialogue with Washington, but without preconditions.

Leading media quoted Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah as saying yesterday that his group has the right to possess an air defense system to counter the Israeli war planes that regularly fly over Lebanon. Israel Radio quoted Nasrallah as saying that Hizbullah has acquired anti-aircraft weapons.

Yesterday HaQaretz reported that some 1,700 dunams (approximately 425 acres) of land in the northern part of Efrat were declared state land last week, paving the way for the West Bank settlement to start the process of seeking government approval to build there. The Civil Administration issued the declaration after rejecting eight appeals by Palestinians against the move.

HaQaretz reported that yesterday FM Tzipi Livni called on the U.S. to not participate in the QDurban 2Q conference to be held in Geneva in April. The Jerusalem Post reported that yesterday senior White House and State Department officials held a conference call with American Jewish leaders to reassure them over the administrationQs decision to participate in preliminary discussions about the conference.

Maariv cited the belief of senior Israeli defense sources that U.S. special envoy George Mitchell will recommend that the U.S. apply economic sanctions against Israel by curtailing American aid so that it relinquishes the settlements.

The Jerusalem Post quoted Bill Knapp, NetanyahuQs American adviser who served as a strategist in President ObamaQs election campaign, as saying that Netanyahu and Obama would enjoy a good working relationship. The newspaper also reported that Netanyahu is not ruling out participation in a Mideast conference in Moscow. The Jerusalem Post also quoted Netanyahu as saying on Monday that he wants to strengthen moderate Palestinian forces. Leading media reported that yesterday the IDF bombed three smuggling tunnels along the Gaza-Egypt border, in response to Qassam rocket attacks earlier in the day.

Citing the German press agency DPA, HaQaretz quoted Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas as saying yesterday: QUnless settlements are brought to a halt, then talks [with Israel] will be meaningless and useless.

The Jerusalem Post and other media reported that the IDF announced on Monday that it plans to partially re-open Zion Route in Hebron to Palestinian vehicles.

Yediot reported that for the first time since a peace treaty was signed with Jordan, that country is suing senior Israelis at the International Court of Justice over war crimes -Q among them PM Olmert, FM Livni, DM Ehud Barak, IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi, Deputy DN Matan Vilnai, and Internal Security Minister Avi Dichter. Speaking on Israel Radio today, Dichter noted that the Israeli military was considerate and that official Jordan, which repressed a Palestinian revolt in 1970, was not likely to back the claim.

HaQaretz reported that a team trained to remove and destroy unexploded ordnance has been operating in Gaza for three weeks, but its work is being held up because Israel has not approved the entry of its equipment nor an area for storing and neutralizing ordnance.

Makor Rishon-Hatzofe reported that British police have arrested three British citizens suspected of planning a terrorist attack in Israel.

Maariv reported that the Jewish community in Greece is angry over the attitude of Israeli-Arab Ambassador to Greece Ali Yihia regarding his reported lack of support for IsraelQs operation in Gaza and its aftermath. The daily cited the Foreign MinistryQs satisfaction with YihiaQs performance.

Yesterday The Jerusalem Post reported that senior defense officials told the newspaper on Sunday that an American refusal to permit the installation of Israeli-made defense systems in the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) may postpone the planned delivery of the fifth-generation stealth jet beyond the target date of 2014.

Yesterday HaQaretz reported that Abdel Wahid al-Nur, the leader of the Sudan Liberation Movement, one of the rebel groups in Sudan's Darfur region, recently visited Israel to discuss with a senior Israeli official the situation in Sudan. Al-Nur came to Israel earlier this month on his own initiative to attend the annual Herzliya Conference

HaQaretz reported that yesterday a Tel Aviv-based female chemist was arrested on suspicion of selling dangerous substances to Palestinians and criminals.

HaQaretz quoted former Meretz leader Yossi Beilin as saying in his new book in Russian that Muhammad Dahlan, who was a member of the Palestinian delegation at Camp David in 2000, called former Shas leader Aryeh Deri and Avigdor Lieberman a Qkey to peace.Q Over the weekend major media cited LiebermanQs desire to become defense minister. Yediot reported that a group of Jewish university professors headed by Dennis Gaitsgory, who teaches mathematics at Harvard, has issued a petition warning that elations between Israel and U.S. Jews might be seriously harmed if Lieberman gets a key ministerial position.

The media reported that Attorney General Menachem Mazuz has decided not to investigate Finance Minister Roni Bar-On over an alleged case of double voting in the Knesset in 2003.

Yediot reported that an urban project in the city of Acre (Akko) might remove the city from the list of UNESCOQs World Heritage sites.

HaQaretz and The Jerusalem Post reported that former British PM Tony Blair will be one of the three laureates of the prestigious Dan David Prize for 2009, awarded annually by Tel Aviv University.

The Jerusalem Post cited a Market Watch survey that found that 65% of Israelis would like Kadima and Likud to form a unity government -- 47% thought that Netanyahu should form the next government, while 39% thought that Livni should.

1. Mideast:

Summary:

The conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized: Disseminators of news should have learned better than to take Palestinian death-toll claims at face value, least of all when sourced directly or indirectly from the Hamas-run government of Gaza.

Block Quotes:

I. "The First Casualty"

The conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized (2/17): Palestinian propaganda is insidious because those being manipulated are oblivious to what is happening. Chaotic images of casualties being hurried to hospitals, gut-wrenching funerals and swaths of shattered buildings create an overarching reality. Against this, Israel's pleadings that the Palestinians are culpable for the destruction, and that the above images lack context, scarcely resonate. Despite six decades of intransigence and a virtual copyright on airline hijackings and suicide bombings, the Palestinians have created a popular brand for themselves by parlaying their self-inflicted victimization into a battering ram against Israel. Disseminators of news should have learned better than to take Palestinian death-toll claims at face value, least of all when sourced directly or indirectly from the Hamas-run government of Gaza.

2. Aftermath of Israeli Elections:

Summary:

The independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz editorialized: [Avigdor Lieberman] serving in any ministry, due to the depth and scope of the investigation, is highly unreasonable and inappropriate, and it is doubtful whether it will pass legal muster.

Leading industrialist Moshe Gaon, whose late father, Benny Gaon, was a strong backer of the Oslo process, wrote in an editorial of the mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot: Now is the time to respect the rules of the democratic game and to understand that the majority opinion must be deferred to even if this is a Right-wing majority of voters.

Block Quotes:

I. "Lieberman Unfit to Be Minister"

The independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz editorialized (2/17): An investigation against Knesset Member Avigdor Lieberman is being pursued by the police, the Tax Authority, and the Israel Securities Authority on suspicions of serious charges including bribery, falsifying corporate documents, fraud, breach of trust, and money laundering. Attorney General Menachem Mazuz has said the allegations are significant.... Lieberman is thus disqualified and forbidden from heading the Public Security Ministry, the Justice Ministry, and the Finance Ministry in light of the investigations by the police and the Tax Authority, which operate under the Finance Ministry. But his serving in any ministry, due to the depth and scope of the investigation, is highly unreasonable and inappropriate, and it is doubtful whether it will pass legal muster. In this situation it would behoove the investigators and prosecutors to make every effort to expedite the matter of the Yisrael Beiteinu chairman, removing the cloud over him. It is incumbent upon Mazuz to update the public and the person who forms the next government on the latest developments regarding the

QsignificantQ suspicions against Lieberman, without harming the investigation.

II. "What Are They Afraid of?"

Leading industrialist Moshe Gaon, whose late father, Benny Gaon, was a strong backer of the Oslo process, wrote in an editorial of the mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (2/17): QOver the past few days I have been hearing the voices of many of my friends in the business and media communities angrily demanding a national unity government. Most of them voted for Kadima or Labor. They now want to see their representatives sit with Likud and the Right.... There have not been any rules in Israeli politics for a long time.... A lame and forced solution in the form of a broad-based government that would rule by rotation is not intended to serve the state. It is a cover-up for lack of willingness on the part of some politicians and media people -Q which I regret, too -Q to see the Right win and the Left lose.... Now is the time to respect the rules of the democratic game and to understand that the majority opinion must be deferred to even if this is a Right-wing majority of voters.

CUNNINGHAM